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TWO LESSONS

OF THE

PAST FOUR YEARS

An Address delivered Thursday, April 29, 1920, before
Thomas Johnson Chapter, Daughters of American Revolution

BY

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Ladies,

Four years have passed since I spoke to you of the very serious dangers which might threaten our Country, and especially our own State, if our rulers should persist in an obstinate refusal to prepare for war, while yet war was only probable, and before it became certain. Whatever may have been the other lessons of these four years, certainly they have not shown me mistaken in the views I then expressed. This fact is, in itself, neither important nor interesting to anyone but myself; encouraged by it, I feel justified, however, in devoting a large part of my trespass on your indulgence this afternoon to pointing out, in as few words as possible, two of the lessons which those willing to be taught by experience may learn from American history since April, 1916.

In the first place, we have had another illustration, and a very striking one, of the significant and well-established fact that, in our case at least, the most effective safeguard of peace is thorough preparedness, both material and moral, for war. It may be a mere co-incidence, but it may also be something more, and, in any event, it is certainly true, that we have never had a war with a civilized enemy while our President was a soldier. Under Washington and Jackson and Taylor and Grant our Country enjoyed all the blessings of peace at home and abroad; under John Adams, we had hostilities with France; under Thomas Jefferson, we had war with Tripoli; under James Madison, we had war with Great Britain. James K. Polk was our President when we drifted into war with Mexico; William McKinley, when we drifted into war with Spain; James Buchanan when we drifted into our own Civil War, Woodrow Wilson when we had war forced upon us three years ago. And not only were all these belligerent Presidents civilians, with the single exception of President McKinley, who, in his youth, had served with credit in the Civil War, every one of them was emphatically a man of peace; not one could rank with Fuzzy Wuzzy as "a first-class fightin' man"; or justly claim to be a fighting man of any class or quality. In 1917, we had another proof, another added to many already furnished us by our history as a nation, that it is not fighting men who get us into war, but men who try so hard and wish so earnestly to avoid fighting that they lead those disposed to trample on our rights to believe this may be done with impunity.

Let me pause here for a moment to remind you how and why we went into the great World War three years ago; for, on this subject, a very curious and wholly groundless fiction has been rather widely propagated. We went to war because, and only because, the German Empire insisted, despite every remonstrance and every warning, on sinking our merchant ships and drowning or exposing to great danger of death American citizens, who were not only neutrals, but non-combatants, some of them women and children. In other words, we went to war with Germany simply because Germany made war on us. Doubtless the Kaiser and his advisers didn't wish us to look at Germany's action in that light. William II may know enough of old English literature to remember the lines:

> That is no war, each mortal knows,
> Where one side only deals the blows.

And he would have liked us to allow the kind of "peace" thus delineated to continue indefinitely between us and himself. But when our ships were sunk by his submarines and our citizens killed or left to perish on the ocean, the common sense of the American people saw that this condition of things could be no more made peace by calling it "peace," than a dog's tail could be made a leg by calling it such; and American public opinion forced American politicians to accept the fact that we were at war. On this point, there is no more room for doubt or dispute than there is as to the death of Julius Caesar or the existence of George Washington. On April 2nd, 1916, President Wilson, addressing both Houses of Congress, said:

> "I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government of the United States; that it formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it; and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defense, but also to exert all its powers and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war."

In accordance with the President's advice, a resolution declaring war against Germany was immediately introduced into both Houses and, after a very bitter debate, was adopted, in the Senate, by a vote of 82 to 6; in the House, by a vote of 373 to 50. As finally adopted, it read:

"Whereas the Imperial German Government has repeatedly committeed acts of war against the Government and the people of the United States of America: Therefore be it Resolved by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the state of war between the United States and the Imperial German Government which has thus been thrust upon the United States is hereby formally declared; and the President be, and he is hereby, authorized and directed to employ the entire naval and military forces of the United States and the resources of the Government to carry on war against the Imperial German Government; and to bring the conflict to a successful termination all of the resources of the country are hereby pledged by the Congress of the United States."

There was nothing obscure or equivocal in this language: obviously Congress said what it meant and meant what it said. We went to war simply as a matter of self-defense, to protect ourselves from unjustifiable and intolerable aggression. This was, on our part, a just and wise and creditable course, and involved no assertion by us, as a nation, of novel and compromising doctrines or visionary and perilous aims. We were emphatically "minding our own business," for the first business of every government is to protect its subjects from violence and wrong.

Nevertheless it has been obstinately, not to say impudently, alleged, publicly and again and again, and it is really believed by some well-meaning persons, that the United States declared war against Germany to assure practical acceptance of what are known as President's Wilson's "Fourteen Points," and especially of the Fourteenth among these "Points," which reads as follows:

"A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike."

These "Points" formed part of an address delivered by the President to the two Houses of Congress on January 8th, 1918, nine months and two days after our declaration of war, in which address the President gave his views, not at all as to the causes of the war, but as to what might be desirable conditions of peace. They are entitled to such measure of weight and respect as may seem appropriate, in view of their authorship, but

they were never adopted by any authority qualified to speak for the people of the United States, or to bind us, either legally or morally, to national action.

The last statements may need a few words of qualification or, at least, of explanation. In a speech on the War with Mexico, delivered in the Senate of the United States on January 26th, 1848, Hon. John A. Dix, then a Senator from New York, said:

> " The declarations of a President, having no power to make war without a vote of Congress, or even to employ the military force of the country except to defend our own territory, is very different from the protest of a sovereign holding the issues of peace and war in his own hands. But the former may not be less effectual when they are sustained . . . . by an undivided public opinion, even though they may not have received a formal response from Congress."

If, therefore, President Wilson's "declaration" of policy embodied in "Point XIV" *was* "sustained by an undivided public opinion," it might be reasonably deemed, in some measure, morally binding on the Country, although it had never received what General Dix called "a formal response from Congress." This was evidently the view of President Wilson himself, for on October 25th, 1918, ten days before the Congressional election of that year, he issued an appeal to the voters to elect only candidates of his own party. In this appeal, he said:

> "If you have approved of my leadership and wish me to continue to be your unembarrassed spokesman in affairs at home and abroad, I earnestly beg that you will express yourselves unmistakably to that effect by returning a Democratic majority to both the Senate and the House of Representatives.
>
> I am your servant and will accept your judgment without cavil, but my power to administer the great trust assigned to me by the Constitution would be seriously impaired should your judgment be adverse, and I must frankly tell you so, because so many critical issues depend upon your verdict * * * If in these critical days it is your wish to sustain me with undivided minds, I beg that you will say so in a way which it will not be possible to misunderstand either here at home or among our associates on the other side of the sea. I submit my difficulties and my hopes to you."

This request for a vote of confidence had especial reference to the prespective negotiations for peace; for the president declared:

> "The leaders of the minority in the present Congress have unquestionably been pro-war, but they have been anti-administration."

Adding:

> "This is no time either for divided council or divided leadership. Unity of command is as necessary now in civil action as it is upon the field of battle . . . . The return of a Republican majority to either House of Congress would, moreover, be interpretative on the other side of the water as a repudiation of my leadership."

I am not concerned with the merits of these views: they may be held by admirers or critics of the President (as they were held by his admirers or critics at the time) to be worthy or unworthy, wise or unwise, politic or impolitic; I quote them only to show on what great issue the voters passed in November, 1918, and I claim with confidence that this issue was incontestably the acceptance or rejection of the President's peace policy, so far as it had been then disclosed to the public, including the well-known "Fourteen Points," and especially the particularly well-known "Point XIV."

At the date of the election, there was a Democratic majority of 10 in the Senate and a Democratic majority of 5 in the House of Representatives: as results of the election, these were changed into a Republican majority of 2 in the Senate and a Republican majority of 45 in the House.

The President had said that "the return of a Republican majority to *either* House of Congress" might admit of interpretation "on the other side of the water as a repudiation of his leadership": without necessarily accepting this statement as literally accurate, one can hardly question that the return of such majorities to *both* Houses of Congress, did *not* show that the "Fourteen Points," and especially that "Point XIV," had the support of that "undivided public opinion," which General Dix said would be needed to make a President's declarations morally binding on the Country, in the absence of "a formal response from Congress."

To my mind, the second noteworthy lesson of the past four years is that the rulers of a great nation, like all other men in all other stations and callings, if they would escape disaster,

must be guided in their policies, not by vain dreams, not by empty visions, conjured up through wilful self-deception, but by the truth. Had William of Hohenzollern seen things as they were, and acted on what he thus saw, he would be today the powerful and prosperous Emperor of a powerful and prosperous empire. Had Nicholas of Russia and Francis Joseph of Austria seen things as they were, and practically accepted what they knew in their hearts to be facts, Austria would be still a nation and Russia would not be a witches' cauldron of abominations and horrors. Had Great Britain heeded the wise counsel of Lord Roberts, had France always turned a perfectly deaf ear to the pernicious advice of her Pacifists, had Belgian politicians lost less time in giving their country universal military service, hundreds of thousands of lives had been spared and myriads of homes had escaped desolation. Finally, had our own government commenced to place the nation in a state of defense in the Summer of 1914, instead of in the Spring of 1917, and it was sheer wilful blindness which prevented this, we should have saved at least half of our present national debt, preserved for useful and happy lives many thousands of our best young men and spared mankind perhaps two years of the war's agony.

We have recently heard through the newspapers of certain astronomers, or scientists of some sort, who shut themselves up in a farm house on the Western prairies, with a wireless apparatus of immense power to get a message from Mars, which message, unfortunately, wasn't forthcoming. Inasmuch as we do not know whether Mars is or is not inhabited by living beings, nor, if it is, whether these beings, or any of them, have a language, nor yet, if they have, what that language is, nor, if the said language exists, whether anybody on this earth could understand it, nor, finally, that the hypothetical Martians, if there be any, have any reason or wish to send us a message, the undertaking of the scientists did not appear to me very promising; to my mind, it bore a great resemblance to looking in a dark cellar at midnight without a light for a black cat which isn't there: nevertheless, there was nothing absolutely irrational or absurd in it; it was giving time and trouble and incurring expense with very, very little chance of return, but not in the face of a positive certainty that there could be no return at all. But for our statesmen to base the Nation's foreign policy on the assumptions that war has become abhorrent to human nature and that peace can and will be made perpetual by a treaty declaring it such, and to do this immediately after the World's experience in the past six years, seems to me, to speak plainly, conduct demanding treatment at the Phipps or the

Shepherd. It might be appropriate in that planet, conjectured to exist by John Stewart Mill, where two and two make five; but, on this Earth, it can be sincerely approved only by those bereft of reason.

And yet this is precisely what many writers and speakers, clergymen and college professors, politicians and office-holders and newspaper men are trying to make the people believe and pretending, or, at least, professing, to believe themselves. These people are, in part, the survivors, or successors and pupils, of our pre-war "Pacifists," that noisy crowd of men and women, all the more mischievous because many of them had been estimable and useful in religious, educational, humanitarian or charitable work, who, in 1915 and 1916 and the early months of 1917, excitedly urged the adoption of a national policy of voluntary impotency and, in some cases, actually lauded poltroonery as a virtue in our young men. In itself, this was not perhaps a matter of any great moment. The Pacifist agitation, especially after its *reductio ad absurdum* in Mr. Henry Ford's Peace Ship, called, with some reason, "the one grim joke of the war," proved utterly futile and trivial as soon as the national sense of duty and national instinct of self-preservation were fairly awakened; but the heedlessness of a free people, where each man's thoughts are too often absorbed by his own needs and interests, gave this agitation a factitious consequence for politicians, and some of the latter undoubtedly believed this small but noisy and self-assertive element really voiced the wishes and the sentiments of the people. Moreover another deplorable result followed from this strange display of unreason. For a time, we were in danger of losing the respect of mankind. "Sir," said William B. Giles, of Virginia, in debate in the Senate on February 8th, 1809, "When love of peace degenerates into fear of war, it becomes of all passions the most despicable": in saying this, he voiced the judgment of all men in all ages. And this was not merely a disgrace to our country and ourselves; it gravely increased our peril, for it is even more clearly true of a nation than of a man that, in the words of Thomas Jefferson: "A coward is much more exposed to quarrels than a man of spirit." Germany might not have adopted or persisted in her policy of submarine aggression on our merchant ships and thus forced us into the war, had her rulers felt less contempt for a nation whose sentiments were voiced, in their judgment, by a little group of men and women fondly believing they had "abolished war," and, who, like the astronomer walking into the well, were too much engrossed by fancied beauties

of a world of their imagination to heed or deal with the evils and dangers of our world of fact.

We have been taught likewise, and taught by a costly experience, that talk, however eloquent, ingenious and edifying and diplomatic correspondence, however subtly conceived and forcibly expressed, can no more take the place or do the work of armies and fleets than a stone can do duty for bread. Jonathan Russell, then our Charge d'Affaires in London, wrote on May 9th, 1812, to James Monroe, who was Secretary of State:

> "We have a reputation in Europe for saying so much and doing so little that we shall not be believed in earnest until we act in a manner not to be mistaken."

When I addressed you in 1916, our *real* reputation in Europe, the reputation disclosed by private correspondence and in daily frank intercourse with all sorts of people abroad, did not differ very widely from what it was a hundred and three years before. To "be believed in earnest," as Russell said, in other words, to have attention paid when we spoke and respect either felt or shown for our sentiments and wishes, we had to show, again quoting Russell, "in a manner not to be mistaken," that, at all events, we were prepared to meet and repel unprovoked aggression.

We Americans then sincerely loved peace, but many foreigners who judged us, not altogether unreasonably, by what some more or less prominent Americans said and did, believed our professed love of peace to be only a cloak for fear of war, and, believing this, they thought of us in accordance with the above quoted words of Senator Giles. To have them respect us we had to show them, and the whole world with them, by our acts, that when, unhappily, war was forced upon us, we were not afraid of war.

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